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The President of the Republic of Sierra Leone, His Excellency Brigadier Julius Maada Bio, reiterated his country's full support for the vision of the ACP Group of States and recalled how his country's relations with the EU have been deepened and strengthened through all successive ACP-EU conventions and partnership agreements, at a special meeting with ACP State representatives in Brussels yesterday.

He also recalled the support and solidarity of the ACP Group of States towards his country for the consolidation of democracy, peace and security and in particular during the outbreak of the Ebola virus in the West African region in 2014.

Affectionately known in his country as "the Father of Democracy," for his outstanding contribution towards promoting democracy, the rule of law, and peace in Sierra Leone, he also highlighted several significant reforms his government has engaged such as free quality education for all, national unity, inclusive growth, food security, effective management of the country's resources, creating an enabling environment for the private sector to thrive, and the fight against corruption, based on the key principles of accountability and transparency.



Address by his Excellency Brigadier Julius Maada Bio, President of the Republic of Sierra Leone to the ACP Committee of Ambassadors.

<https://youtu.be/mWSeHDIRqxo> ⁽¹⁾

Your Excellencies,

Chairman, the Committee of Ambassadors,

Secretary-General,

Members of the Committee of Ambassadors,

Distinguished Ladies and Gentlemen,

My delegation and I are greatly honoured by the warm welcome accorded us here at the African, Caribbean and Pacific (ACP) House. Certainly, my working visit to the Headquarters of the European Union here in Brussels would have been incomplete without this visit to our Secretariat. I am grateful that you have taken time out of your busy schedules to be here.

I am accompanied on this visit by a cross section of ministers and senior officials in my administration. May I introduce my Foreign Minister, Dr Alie Kabba – who is responsible for managing foreign relations and servicing international cooperation? Also, Hon. Samuel Tamba Musa, is my Ambassador-designate to the Kingdom of Belgium. He will represent Sierra Leone in the ACP group and he will facilitate our participation in the ACP Group. My administration is very proud of the great work this Group continues to do in pursuing our shared interest. I assure you of my and my country's fullest support for your work.

Chairman and Distinguished Ladies and Gentlemen,

My country, Sierra Leone, has a long history of active representation in the ACP partnership framework. We are in common circumstances; we share cultural and economic affinities; and, we have common aspirations.

Sierra Leone and European Union relationships have been forged and refashioned through over three decades by the principles and objectives of successive ACP-EU Conventions and Partnership Agreements. Within those frameworks of cooperation, Sierra Leone has received substantial financial resources in the form of grants under the various European Development Funds (EDFs). Those grants have greatly supported our development as a nation. Under the current EDF, (the 11th), the European Union allocated EUR 376M (Three Hundred and Seventy Six Million Euros) to Sierra Leone for the period spanning 2014 to 2020. I would like to thank you all, again, for standing by us and advocating for a special disbursement of funding during the devastating Ebola Virus Disease outbreak from 2014 -2015. We are also grateful for support from the EU for democratic parliamentary and presidential elections that ushered my opposition party into power. We have closely considered the EU report on the elections and my government will attentively implement each of the recommendations. The EU's recommendations are good for our democracy. We have a shared interest in sustaining stable and democratic governance in Sierra Leone and across the ACP.

Chairman, Distinguished Ladies and Gentlemen,

But there is a more sombre sub-narrative to all this. We took over a country with double-digit inflation, high public expenditure,

low domestic revenue mobilization, little public finance management, unsustainable domestic debt burden, near unserviceable external debt, and an IMF program suspension. Complicating this was a predatory and murky business environment marked by high-level corruption and unclear government priorities. The current 11th EDF with the EU is being executed in this environment and the funding priorities of the last government still determine which programmes will be funded through 2020. In the right environment and context, the numerous EU funded programmes and projects in the areas of road infrastructure, agriculture, health, communications, public administration, and many other sectors, could have had a bigger and more transformational footprint on our economy. They have not had the expected impact, regrettably.

So your excellencies and distinguished ladies and gentlemen, what next? I have a reputation for asking questions and indulge me for a minute:

1. Six (6) of the world's fastest growing economies are in the ACP Group. The countries in the ACP and the EU alone represent more than half of all UN member countries and unite over 1.5 billion people. Given the irreversible trend of globalisation and the changing geopolitical landscape of international trade and cooperation, how do we sustain the economic, political and cultural dialogue between and among us in the ACP and the EU? Basically, what next?
2. As we start looking beyond the end of the Cotonou Agreement in 2020, how do we begin to think about the role of the ACP with respect to a new European Partnership Agreement? How do we unpack the multiple questions that beg for answers and deep critical thinking about a future relationship or even the possibility of future relationships? Is it through the collective and inclusive engagement of all stakeholders? Are there possible threats and risks to various approaches? How do we navigate or respond to those threats and risks?
3. Post Cotonou, what kind of partnership agreement will be mutually beneficial to the European Union and to either an ACP collective or, say, Sierra Leone as a member within the ACP framework?
4. Could we diversify partnerships and funding sources beyond an ACP-EU partnership?
5. How do we enhance the financial stability of our ACP Group? How do we reinforce or even restructure and enhance intra-ACP relations especially through South-South Cooperation?
6. How do we strengthen the ACP Secretariat and enhance its visibility?

Let us reflect on those questions.

I commend the work done by the Council of Ministers and Committee of Ambassadors towards the implementation of the Sipopo and Waigani Declarations of the 7th and 8th ACP Summits, including developing the negotiation structure for the ACP Group and its three (3) Strategic pillars. The Secretary General, Dr. Patrick Gomes, has also shared his vision with me.

But allow me, Distinguished Ladies and Gentlemen, to suggest that we must anticipate the change in relationship with the EU by cleaning our homesteads and strengthening our hands. My government has embarked on a new direction of inclusive democratic governance, mobilizing domestic revenue, transparently managing public finances and procurement, making the regulatory and legal environment for business predictable and favourable, developing rural infrastructure, and investing in human capital development through free quality education, quality healthcare, and diversifying the economy. We continue to make it easier for credible private investors to take a second look at very promising investment opportunities in our fisheries, tourism, and agriculture sectors among others. We continue to simplify and fast track the ease of establishing a business with the creation of an Investment Board led by the Vice President. Tax regimes and customs processes have been automated and streamlined. We are scaling up investments in roads, electricity, ICT, and water supply. Our country is brimming with business opportunities; Sierra Leone is open for business. We will continue to make our country attractive to EU capital investments and partnerships. We want our partnerships to be mutually beneficial and thrive as a result of trade and cooperation that benefits all parties. Allow me to suggest that before negotiating future relationships, we in the ACP group should first prime our economies and economic systems and provide the right governance framework for sustainable development.

While I do not envy your great work here at the ACP, count on me for my and my country's unconditional support.

I thank you for your attention.

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